

# **Big Bird in a Small Cage**

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## Big Bird in a Small Cage by Oscarwildes

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**Summary:**

There's a school play and Stan is ill. Or so he thinks he is.

## **Big Bird in a Small Cage**

### **Author's Note:**

Part of an AU I have where the play happens in eighth grade instead of third grade and is a mix of the book and film.

According to Stan, rehearsals for the school play are too long for what they're worth, or at least, it's what he tells the others when they complain about Bill being busy all the time. Long rehearsals are partly due to the students' lack of enthusiasm and the drama department's low income as the school still refuses to fund them because, like the vice principal once said, "A middle school's budget should not be wasted on paper trees and glitter". The glitter in question refers to the Grand Glitter Incident of 1985 which set the school principal on a fury after the auditorium had been showered with glitter instead of large confettis. To this day, students still report seeing specks around the school.

Going out feels different, Bill cancelling on them more often as opening night approaches, and the others not noticing a change in the group worries Stan. Being somewhat closer to a brotherly figure to the group than a leader - or the brains or heart of the operation, as other people might think - Stan can feel his absence and can't help but stare at the empty chair next to him and look around hoping he'll magically appear. He misses the presence he brings to the group and decides to remedy this by offering Bill his help if needed. ("Whatever you need, just ask.")

The offer is put to good use when Bill asks if he's willing to practice lines with him. By this, he means for Stan to read Beverly's part and without hesitation, Stan agrees. It seems easy enough, reading text and correcting Bill.

And it is, until he gets a strange sensation in his stomach when he comes across a kiss in the script (one that Bill and Beverly will have to share on stage). Without questioning this odd reaction, he focuses on the boy currently pacing around his room, head looking up from the pages, stuttering out newly memorized dialogue.

Spending time with Bill like this, just the two of them, brings back the joy that left with Bill once he received the part. It's selfish of him, he thinks, to want Bill for himself for a few hours, and he feels awful thinking about the rest of the gang who undoubtedly miss him just as much. Having to explain this makes him feel uneasy; Bill, for some unknown reason that Stan would sure like to find out, seems to know and understand him more than he should as he bends rules and assures he's feeling comfortable without needing to ask. He simply does these things without requests, making Stan completely baffled at the thought of someone caring enough to allow his habits into their life.

The following Thursday is particularly hard for Bill. Stan brings his attention to the teachers and students sighing in exasperation as Bill, with great difficulty, stutters his way to the end of the scene. Bill notices them too, he observes, because he's gone quiet, swallowing hard with his head hanging down. He manages to catch Bill's gaze and offers him a small encouraging smile and once Bill sends him one in return, he knows he'll be okay, and if he's not, he can always cheer him up after school.

Rehearsals continue, as do their after school meetings, and Stan finds himself warming up when Bill's face lights up after delivering his lines without trouble and stares at him looking prouder than he's ever looked with Georgie. The good days are piling up, boosting Bill's confidence, but still, he confesses he's afraid he'll freeze and his nerves will trigger the worst.

'If anyone can do it, it's you, Bill.'

They leave it at that, and from his seat on his bed, Bill gives him a timid smile, eyes shining and speaking a thousand words, and Stan starts feeling something similar to what had happened when he'd read the kiss: small, heavy, ball-like sensations fluttering around his stomach, giving the impression he's eaten a handful of butterflies.

At first, it scares him, the feeling being so foreign and intense he almost thinks of calling Eddie for help. Only when he wakes up the next morning does it go away, though, not for long, the butterflies coming back later that day, and the next, and the next. They sneak up on him when he's least expecting it, mostly during the day, but as

days go by, they no longer follow a strict schedule - something Stan would much prefer.

Stan tries to avoid the problem. Nothing happens.

In the end, after weeks of torture, Eddie approaches him after noticing Stan clutching his stomach frequently enough to not be marked off as a coincidence.

‘Are you okay? You’ve been...’ He points towards Stan’s arms wrapped around his middle. ‘I know you get sick easily. I’ve got pills for that if it’s a bug.’

Shaking his head, he replies, ‘It’s not a bug, but I’m fine.’ Stan regrets lying to him as he suspects Eddie knows more about this than himself. Normally, Eddie would have gone on about said bug and its dangers and risks, but the calmness radiating from him is everything but innocent.

And as if to confirm his assumptions, Eddie gives him a strange look of understanding before they hear the rest of their friends approaching them. Stan almost starts to panic in fear they might have overheard them. He doesn’t need five more Eddies trailing behind him wondering if he’s sick.

Eddie starts a coughing fit, earning a confused frown from Stan, and turns quickly to face him. ‘Right. Well, if you need any help with your homework, you can always ask us. We’ve all passed your grade-’

‘Fuck yeah, we did. Remember when I nailed that test just as hard as I nailed Eddie’s mom-’

‘Shut up, Richie,’ Beverly shushes playfully.

Stan watches as Eddie’s face turns the same shade as the pink polo he’s wearing.

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Later on, Stan’s heart joins his stomach, setting a new beat for the butterflies to follow, their flight occurring more often than it previously did, their playtime happening multiple times per day.

Being completely clueless to the situation and having a physical response to an unknown cause makes him feel uneasy. Anxious. Nauseous.

Things change when he finds a pattern. It hurts most when he thinks about Bill. The pain is constant when he's around him, he finds, but it peaks when he focuses on little things like the scar on his right eyebrow he got from Bowers pushing him off his bike, or how his lips purse when he over-thinks and turn dark red when he bites them too hard. And then there's the sense of security he provides; an aura of comfort, warm and stable at all times. How Stan feels more cherished and appreciated by Bill than his own parents, how, with Bill around, nothing wicked can come to him.

To verify if he is indeed right, Stan decides to record his cramps in hope to finally put an end to his terrors. He's at his desk when the idea comes to him, unfinished homework sitting in front of him. Pushing them aside, he opens one of the drawers on his right side, pulling out a notebook from a pile of untouched journals, opening it and finding a blank page waiting for him.

Five minutes later, he's filled two pages, writing every detail he can recall about the times his stomach has hurt: dates, times, pain, settings. (Writing 'causes' instead of 'settings' at the top of the page to describe the moments preceding the aches felt wrong; causes would mean he's certain they're what's provoking the butterflies and this kind of certainty is the last thing he's sure of at the moment. He doesn't trust himself.)

The last entry dates a few hours earlier:

*“ Date: May 24th, 1989 Time: 15:55 Pain: 7/10*

*We were leaving school. It was beautiful outside and the sun hit Bill's hair, making it look redder than usual. It looked pretty. ”*

Every single one of them is about Bill. Bill did this, Bill said that, Bill

looked nice, Bill, Bill, Bill.

Stan wonders what's different now, why his stomach suddenly decided to hurt at the thought of Bill.

He's unaware of thinking about Bill differently, he's always thought of him the same, or at least, he's not conscious of any evolution regarding his feelings towards him.

It's not like he has a favourite friend and Bill's the chosen one. Or his best friend. If it means anything, Richie was the first friend he made back in primary school, but then again, he's still not comfortable with Richie - or anyone - unexpectedly touching him. And Bill... Well, he doesn't *mind* it when Bill touches him. The problem is Bill never actively touches him. There's the brushing fingertips against his arm, a soft grazing of their shoulders, a bump of hips in the hallway (where Bill will profusely excuse himself and take a sidestep to leave him enough space). They're not like Ben's crushing hugs or Beverly's hand squeezing his shoulder. They're meaningless and accidental, yet they stay wandering in his mind for hours, weeks, even months after they happen. Trying to make sense of this only leads to failure; all previous attempts availed.

With time, the symptoms worsen, becoming part of his daily routine. He wakes up at the same hour, prays, eats the same bland breakfast, bikes to school, waits for the butterflies to start their course. Ignoring it isn't an option anymore. Bill hasn't been behaving abnormally around him meaning he probably hasn't noticed Stan's internal fight, which is good news, except Stan's now realizing he's noticing unusual things about Bill and it frightens him more than the stomach aches.

He stares at the fluttering of his eyelashes when the wind blows too fast, how he's never noticed the light dusting of pale freckles across his nose. He wants to reach out and touch his skin to discover if it feels as soft as it looks from afar, travel up the length of his long neck and stop at his cheeks and see if they redden under his touch. How his face scrunches up in defeat when a drawing or story just isn't working his way (which happens often and Stan can't help but feel bad because it's adorable), and when a genuine laugh escapes him, he looks like a beautiful work of art. He's expected to fall in love with a nice sweet girl and get married but all he can think of is how Bill's

lips - red and plump, inviting, enticing- would feel against his own and- *oh* .

This is what he overhears girls talk about at school. When they go on and on about boys and their good looks and how it makes them feel. Looking at Bill, Stan understands why they do so. He too feels something when he looks at him, and now that it's clear the aching was in fact longing, he doesn't know if he should curse Bill or himself. Out of everyone he could have fallen for, it had to be William fucking Denbrough.

That night, when he's laying in bed with two blankets covering him patiently waiting for sleep to come, he squeezes his eyes shut and wishes his feelings away. With heavy eyes and a dizzy mind, he falls asleep with echoes of Bill's voice swimming in his head and dull blue eyes staring back at him. His troubles seem to vanish.

But then, in the morning, Stan wakes up and the realization that he's doomed washes over him.

He likes Bill Denbrough. Fuck, he might even love him for all he knows. Though, the difference doesn't matter; he's never felt like this before, he's unquestionably never had romantic feelings or anything remotely close for any of his friends. Or anyone. Especially not towards another boy. Any boy.

All he thinks of is the day they were taught about the AIDS crisis in school and the disapproving look on their teacher's face at the mention of homosexuality, the way his father glares at the gay couple who live down the road whenever they walk down the street holding hands, hearing rumours of Bowers beating the life out of a kid at school who had kissed another boy during a game of truth or dare.

Stan hates the idea of becoming a target for the town to take turns shooting down simply because he finds Bill prettier and kinder than all the girls he can think of.

He remembers reading about this, the Torah saying it's an abomination as if he's feeling this on purpose. Like he chose this, that he's asking for it. He's not.



Liking boys the way he should like girls is not proper, it's not right, it's everything he's not supposed to do. It creates a disturbance in what he was made to understand about life, each lesson and rule staying in numbered boxes that are to be opened when he reaches the appropriate age and acquired experiences. He knows this, but then he imagines Bill's face, bright and flushed, and he nearly wants to give in.

Going to the synagogue feels strange after this; the stares from his father feel like lasers piercing through his body in suspicion. Outings become harder; everyone seems to be scrutinizing him, following his every move as if they've been informed of his situation and are waiting for him to slip up. Utterly paranoid, he no longer mentions Bill outside of the group, only speaking of him if his name is brought up in conversations. Stan feels filthy thinking about him, like he's something forbidden and immoral, that if he thinks of the wrong thing, people - *his father, his mother* - will be able to tell.

One night, he pulls a stuffed bird under his chin and clutching it against his chest, weeping silently in bed wishing for all this to be over, to be normal and not cursed with an unforgivable sickness like the books in the library say. The only sickness he's aware of having is the sharp pain he feels in his heart when Bill smiles at a nice looking girl at school. He's jealous of them, the girls who giggle and turn beet red when Bill looks in their direction. Unlike him, they have nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of.

All he can do for now is hide.

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With time, the pain becomes a part of him. Having to pretend nothing's wrong is not easy, but he manages. When he's not studying for school or helping Bill, he goes back to what he's been neglecting, the one thing that keeps him sane and happy: bird watching.

Mike's going to the library and Stan decides to accompany him; he hasn't been to the library as often since... and books are a good start to dive back into his old hobby.

Stan's last visit to the library was with Bill when they'd taken Georgie

to the Children's Library where, for the past few years, the librarian reads a new book for the kids every week. Georgie has always adored story hour and would pull his older brother and Stan by the sleeves, making them trip in their steps, afraid his favourite spot by Miss Davies' chair would be taken by another child. Most of the time, the evenings ended with Ben and Mike joining them if they happened to be nearby - or already strolling around the library - Georgie ecstatic as his friends sat next to him.

The section is still the brightest in the library; the mattress still thin (so thin it doesn't deserve to be called a mattress) and quilt-like, colourful cushions surrounding it, the whole enclosed by tacky curtains used to adorn the room. Nothing matches, the corner looking like a rainbow having done ecstasy with a grandmother.

The rest of the library - the old library - is as disappointing as it's always been. Its appearance is not the problem, the different shades of wood that make the furniture clench together trouble him, but he's seen worse. He can pretend they're the same brown if he doesn't look closely. It never feels truly inviting, winters being the hardest as the cold air penetrates through the front doors and stacks of books rest where the fireplace had once been. The shelves are small and don't hold a ton of books, though, Stan can't complain, he's never found a book out of place.

Walking through the nature shelves, hidden between a few dusty ones he's already read, he comes across a book he's never seen before. The book looks relatively new considering the undamaged binding and a sense of pride and excitement fills Stan when he opens the book and sees the blank library card. He'll be the first home the book will visit.

Delighted with his new find, he holds it tight against his chest, spotting Mike wandering around the history and fiction sections and joins him.

'Did you find anything?' Mike asks, books threatening to fall out of his arms.

As Stan nods, a small book slips from Mike's hold. Stan bends down to pick it up and grasps another one before it can hit the floor. 'Do

you need any help with those?’

Mike’s face lights up. ‘Yeah, thanks.’

The sun is out when they walk down to Memorial Park, the sky blue and clear of clouds. They walk past Stan’s favourite bench and nestle against a large tree near the bird bath. Mike has a book open on his lap, the rest of them tucked in his backpack. He’s mostly silent, letting out a calming hum every once in a while. Mike looks serene and Stan can’t help but allow himself to relax with a soft sigh.

Taking his binoculars and a notebook out of his bag, Stan settles next to Mike, and it’s nice. From time to time, Mike steals Stan’s pen, noting excerpts from his books down his arms and once he’s filled every patch of skin available, Stan carefully rips a page from his journal and Mike takes it with gratitude.

They stay like this for hours, Mike’s humming and the chirping from the birds distracting Stan from his troubles. He almost feels at peace.

Until one day when Bill corners him after school.

Stan is tidying up his locker - not that it needs any tidying up as everything is already perfectly organized - putting away textbooks he no longer needs on the middle shelf along the rest of them, double-checking his backpack making sure he has everything for the evening. He zips it close and is about to slip an arm through one of the straps when he hears someone hurrying down the corridor.

Turning, he sees Bill rushing towards him looking positively distressed, dark fringe falling on his face, his breath uneven.

‘The play is next week!’ Bill stares at him as if he holds the answer to his problem. He does not because he’s very well aware the play is happening next week and it’s so ridiculous Stan wants to laugh. What he’s clueless to is the reason why Bill would burst out of nowhere reminding him of something he already knows.

‘I had no idea, Bill. Thank you for telling me,’ and Bill fumes in an almost comical way.

‘I have to kiss Beverly! I haven’t... I’ve never kissed anyone before.’

He looks evidently upset by this.

Kissing someone is the last of Stan's problems; the only person he'd kiss is standing right in front of his face, proclaiming that his lack of experience is problematic to his short-term career as a one-time-only school play actor, and there is no way Bill would agree to kiss him at this moment.

'Kiss someone else first, then.' He doesn't put much thought to it, it's the only possible option besides sucking it up - which Bill *could* do, but judging by his appearance, he's afraid he'll do something reckless if he mentions the idea.

'What? Who-'

Stan didn't think this far.

Firstly, he thinks of girls. The only other girls they know would make a fool of Bill and as much as he wants to help him, it would only end badly. Asking Beverly to practice beforehand is a safe option, one that Stan isn't sure Bill would agree to. This leaves... boys. Bill kissing boys. Most importantly, Bill kissing boys who aren't him. He shrugs off the bitter taste in his mouth.

There's Richie and Eddie. They've always been close, those three, and maybe this would make him more willing. Or perhaps this tight childhood bond is the problem and Mike and Ben would be more fitting for the position. He doesn't know how the boys would react to Bill asking them and he's afraid he'll ruin their friendships. He wouldn't do this to him. Considering this, he's left with one option. The only boy he knows who'd be willing-

'You can kiss me.'

The moment it leaves his mouth, he regrets even thinking about it. This is exactly what he's been trying to avoid for the past two months; impulsivity overtaking him and betraying his hard work. He can't take it back no matter how hard he tries. The look on Bill's face says it all, he's heard him and wasn't expecting Stan to propose this. To be fair, if he'd reacted any differently, Stan would be questioning his sanity. Both his Bill's and his own.

Rectifying his words would lead to nowhere, so Stan waits for Bill to explode in his face.

‘You want me to kiss you? Buh-buh-but-’ The way Bill says it almost sounds accusatory, like he’s blaming him for the proposition and the future events it will trigger. Stan can barely understand why his level of self-restraint lowered to the point where he managed to spill his secret out; there’s no way he could explain to Bill without revealing his feelings, and why, for a fraction of a second, it seemed like a good idea.

‘Would you prefer to kiss Richie?’ The question is an alternative; he could kiss Richie and leave Stan wondering how one can fuck up this much, or maybe the idea of kissing him will repulse him enough he’ll take the next best thing: himself.

Bill grimaces and shakes his head. ‘No. His mouth must stink with all that trash coming out of it.’ And the small smile he gives him seems like a confirmation.

So this is it, then. He’s going to kiss Bill.

Fuck . *He’s going to kiss Bill* .

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Thursday is when it happens. A short twenty-four hours after Bill came to him.

After Stan freaks out at the idea of kissing Bill in his own home, they end up in Bill’s bedroom, sitting face to face on his bed, their legs crossed and knees brushing together. He’s trying his best to stay calm but keeps staring at the Gremlins poster behind Bill’s head, hoping Gizmo will come to life and take him away. It’s a stupid thing to hope, especially since he’s well aware he put himself in this mess. Though, the door is not far away from him, and in a few steps, he could make it to the hallway and pretend he’s late for an imaginary rendez-vous.

Right now, more than anything, he wants to leave, but something is keeping him here; Bill’s as nervous as him. Bill keeps swallowing

every sixty seconds, eyes flickering between Stan's eyes and lips, like he's questioning whether he should go through with it.

Bill clears his throat and Stan looks up to him.

'Maybe I shouh- should just-'

And then Bill leans forward so quickly and startled, Stan jumps back, hand flying to Bill's chest, pushing him away before he makes a grave error and creates a horrific memory for the both of them. Not having a talk about the kiss beforehand, Stan could not have anticipated this, and Bill's willingness confuses him. Maybe he wants to do it as quickly as possible so they won't have to speak of it ever again, and as appealing as it sounds, it's not a great first kiss story. Not that he needs one, surely not in this context, but still.

'Slow,' he hears himself say in a voice so high pitched he almost sounds like a girl. 'Go slower.'

Bill realizes his mistake and nods, the high points of his cheeks starting to blush.

'Stay still,' he warns him with a soft tone.

Unsure if he should follow Bill's lead or not, Stan does what he's been instructed, letting Bill make the first move. It doesn't happen right away; Bill's staring at his lips, and Stan refuses to think of the worst. That Bill's doubting his choice, that he's regretting it, that he doesn't want this, that he's taking all this time to picture Beverly's lips instead of his own.

Finally, after what felt like hours of waiting, Bill's head moves forward and Stan freezes.

Whenever he sees people kissing, he always looks away, feeling uncomfortable witnessing something so personal. He's completely oblivious to what should be done during a kiss. What should he do when Bill's actually kissing him? If he closes his eyes, will he miss anything?

A nose bumps against his and scares him out of his worries. Bill is close to his face. Very close. So close he can finally take a closer look

at the freckles he's admired from afar for so long. They're extremely faint, barely noticeable from his position. How did he ever notice them from far away?

Still not moving an inch of his body, Stan feels Bill crooking his face at an odd angle, making his nose dig into the lower part of cheekbone. It feels odd, but Stan doesn't question it. Out of anxiousness, he closes his eyes, waiting for Bill to do something. Anything. And then he does.

At first, Bill's lips tentatively press against his in a peck light enough for Stan to wonder if it was real or simply his imagination running wild. The lips come back, this time pressing painfully hard, making it impossible for Stan to kiss back. The kiss doesn't feel right. Stan knows it has nothing to do with Bill himself; if he'd be aware of what he's supposed to do, he'd enjoy it more -- not that he doesn't like it, quite the contrary, having Bill's lips smashed upon his makes him feel better than he's ever felt. It's conflicting.

He feels Bill pulling away and he opens his eyes to see a strange look on Bill's face. A sense of guilt washes over him as he sees what he thinks is shame. That he's the reason Bill is currently staring at his neck, avoiding his eyes. Most importantly, that he's ruined their first kiss. Not their first kiss together- no, no, Stan has dreams but never to this extent, being the ever-so realist that he is. If Stan enjoyed the kiss due to his crush, Bill, having no romantic feelings whatsoever for him, must have hated it. Bill must loathe him for having robbed him the opportunity to have his first kiss with Beverly.

Bill opens his mouth and shuts it close before muttering: 'We need more practice...'

And then Bill's hands are on his cheeks, sliding down to cup his jaw, and he dives in just like he did on his first try, though, this time, he finds the perfect angle and their lips connect in a better kiss. *A good kiss.*

Forgetting to thrive for perfection makes everything better. Bill's lips, which are softer than he expected, are pressing hard enough but melting with his own. Now able to kiss him back, Stan does just so, feeling better than he ever imagined. It feels right.

His heart is beating pounding in his chest, waking up the butterflies in his stomach, making them dance to the beat echoing throughout his body. Then, suddenly, cold air hits his lips and this must mean Bill's stopped kissing him. He opens his eyes and meets a wide-eyed Bill whose tongue pokes out to lick his lips. Stan swallows hard at the scene, unable to look away.

But then Bill's eyes linger down to his lips and the atmosphere changes. There's a spark that wasn't there before and Stan has barely time to notice Bill biting his lip before he's kissing him again.

A sound Stan has never made before escapes his throat. High pitched and coming from deep down his throat, it reminds him of a bird shrieking or the noises he hears in the bathroom when he walks in and disturbs eighth graders.

One of Bill's hands drops down, his watch hitting Stan's jaw. Unsure what to do, it wraps around Stan's neck after a few moments of hesitation. Stan swears he can feel the hand pushing his face closer - as if they weren't close enough already - and he allows himself to be pulled forward.

At this point, Stan would nearly allow anything to happen. He's too content with what's happening that the fine line distinguishing reality and fiction blurs in his mind. He should stop this, he *needs* to stop this before he gets carried away and believes there's something real, that there are feelings behind this, that Bill reciprocates his feelings.

Their lips stay brushing against one another when Bill breaks the kiss to take a breath - *fuck* , Stan needs to breathe too. Not once did he think to breathe, he *needs* to breathe and maybe the lack of oxygen might be the reason he can't think straight. Bill comes back for another kiss, not that he needs to, Stan thinks, because Beverly might fall for him if he kisses her like this during the play. Or maybe it's just his infatuation making him believe the kiss is better than what Bill is experiencing.

He thinks about the hands on him caressing his face like he's a fragile doll, how he's never liked anyone touching him this way, but Bill is sending shivers down his spine and it feels... nice. And it's a problem. He's had a taste of it, of what he could have with Bill - the kisses, the



touches - and he starts thinking about more; being able to hold his hand wherever he wants whenever he wants, afternoons nestling in bed while Bill reads him another of his short stories, waking up every morning next to him, coming *home* to him-.

Feeling courageous, Stan breaks the kiss, taking a second to admire the boy in front of him, and timidly brings his hand up to Bill's cheek letting his fingertips graze across his skin, making Bill blink profusely at the contact.

'Stan?'

His hand drops to his lap as if he's just been burnt. *Fuck* . He shouldn't have done that. Bill has probably figured it out and he'll yell at him - though, this scenario doesn't match the bewildered look on Bill's face, but nonetheless, it's what he'll do. Stan's sure of it. He needs to leave.

Bill opens his mouth to speak when they hear footsteps outside the bedroom. The door suddenly kicks open and an over-excited little George runs in.

'Billy! Mom said I can- Oh! Hi Stan!'

They spring apart at the sight of him. Stan tightly grips Bill's duvet, his knuckles turning white. He doesn't even dare to glance at Bill.

'Juh-Juh-Georgie! What are you doing here?'

'Mom said I can go to the park if you come with me.' He pauses. 'Why was your door closed? You never close your door.'

Bill shoots a look in Stan's direction before coughing. 'I-I-'

Whilst Georgie looks somewhat gleeful, Stan can't help but feel the opposite.

Clenching his fists, his palms become sweaty, the temperature in the room rising at an incomprehensible speed. It's hot. Too hot. Thoughts race in his mind: Bill angrily rejecting him, calling him a queer and pushing him out, his parents finding out, his friends finding out, the whole town finding out and humiliating him. It's not

normal. None of this is normal.

His throat is starting to feel dry and he tries to swallow but it gets stuck. He needs to get out. He needs air. He'll die in Bill's bedroom if he doesn't.

He frantically gets up, body shaking, and he can feel Bill's eyes following him. 'I-I need to go.' Walking over to the wooden desk chair, he grabs his backpack and heads towards the door in a hurry.

'Bye Stan!'

'Wait! Stan-'

Stan doesn't turn back.

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Once he's outside, he breathes in, taking in the cold air, and walks away from the house until he reaches the pavement and lets out a broken sob as one would scream.

All he wants is to disappear, but with his back to Bill's window, he wonders if the boy's watching the spectacle from his bedroom, and this grounds him in the most terrifying way: he's not alone in this, he's dragged Bill along and disappearing wouldn't make Bill forget.

When he starts walking, he doesn't stop until he looks up and sees he's at the corner of West Broadway. This road is not unfamiliar to him, having taken it by walk, car, and bike for most of his young life. On his right, the synagogue towers over him, the bricks turning from a warm brown to a deep burgundy as clouds follow his steps. It looks alarmingly unsettling.

'I can't go home,' he mutters to himself, staring at the building, seeing a shadow in one of the windows resembling his father. 'I can't go home, I can't go home, I can't go home.'

Finding himself crossing the road, he continues down Witcham in direction to Eddie's house. Eddie will know what to do. He'll tell him the truth about the stomach aches and what just happened and he'll know how to fix him. A few vitamins and a bullet in his head will do

the trick.

It seems like a good idea until he thinks of Eddie's mother. She loathes him. To be fair, she hates most of them, but she holds a special grudge against him. Eddie always makes sure Stan knows he's not like his mother, that he doesn't think less of Stan for being Jewish. This doesn't stop Stan from hearing her crude words and in this moment, in his state, he thinks he might burst out crying if she'd scowl in his direction, and his tears will only fuel her hatred.

Anything but her. But his parents. But Bill.

Feeling hopeless, he stops in his tracks. He has no plan, nowhere to go, and feels himself tearing up again. Fuck. Fuck, *fuck*.

He turns around, taking in his surroundings, feeling disoriented. Looking south, he recognizes Richie's house. That'll do. With a sigh of relief, he runs towards the house, and within moments, stands before the door. He rings the doorbell, once, twice, then takes a small step back, using the back of his hand to wipe any tears that might have escaped.

Richie opens the door, his glasses sitting askew on the bridge of his nose, hair wilder than it had been a few hours ago at school. He must look a mess because Richie doesn't greet him with a joke.

'Stan?'

'I- I...' There's a lump in his throat he tries to swallow down. It doesn't move and the tears threaten to come back. Coming here was not part of his original plan and he struggles to find something to say. 'Can I... Can I come in?'

Richie nods quickly, inviting him in. 'Yeah, yeah.' He takes in Stan's appearance. 'Might be best we go straight to my room.' Stan fakes a smile in lieu of a thanks and heads for the stairs.

Richie's bedroom has always intrigued him. As a whole, it does not resemble Stan's, the scattered possessions being the first thing to catch your eye (whereas Stan leaves nothing out of their designated place) but if you stay long enough, you start noticing the school

books and papers divided into each subject along with at least two identical copies of his handwritten notes. It's an organized chaos, unlike Bill's bedroom, with its books and crumbled paper in every corner, Georgie's toys forgotten on the floor.

It's so *him* and Stan hates how comfortable he feels there. Thinking about Bill's room reminds him of why he's here, why he's pacing around the room with tears running down his cheeks staring at a jacket on Richie's bed he swears belongs to Eddie.

He doesn't know what to do. He won't be able to face Bill ever again, hell, he won't be able to face anyone ever again. Richie isn't an exception, he'll want to do the same after he finds out. Shit, Richie will kick him out just like his parents will. He wants to leave town more than anything but he's thirteen and it just started raining- and of course it started raining, his day can't get any worse-

'Stanley?'

Stan turns to face the voice. Richie's standing in the doorway, a worried expression written on his face. Straightening his back, he sniffs, trying his hardest to not let his eyes water. If he pretends he's never kissed his first love, perhaps his troubles will disappear like magic - though magic isn't real, they're tricks, illusions, games made to fool a person just like what he's attempting to do. Fool Richie. Or himself. He doesn't know.

It seems like a reasonable plan until Richie moves closer, hesitantly taking small steps forward as if he's afraid to startle him. Turning himself into a defenseless doe and Richie into a hunter is not the magic trick he meant to perform.

Studying him for a minute, Stan can see Richie's eyes roaming at his red puffy eyes to the backpack he still has on his back. Tensing at the rigorous examination, Stan is about to ask him to stop when Richie finally speaks.

'Is it Bill?'

Taken aback from the accurate guess, he chokes out, 'How do you know?'

'I wish Eddie would look at me the way you look at Bill.' It's a confession and Stan is unsure how to react. Everyone knows Eddie and he are close, there's no doubt about it. Even Stan noticed how they seem to revolve around each other, always coming back for more no matter what. He was too distracted by his feelings for Bill he never realized Richie was in the same situation.

Walking over to his unmade bed, Richie sits on the edge, picking up the pink and purple windbreaker, smiling as he rolls the fabric between his fingers. 'Eddie accidentally left it here three months ago and never asked for it back. It still smells like that strong detergent he uses.' He smiles, looking up at Stan. 'I don't know what happened between you and Bill, but I think I know how you feel.'

Oh.

Stan drops down on the mattress besides him wondering if anyone else knows, if anyone has paid enough attention to him to notice. Staring at the jacket, he ponders whether he's been wrong, that it wasn't something visible, that Richie didn't see Bill's name written on his forehead but instead had smelt him like he can smell Eddie on the jacket. After all, Bill did smell particularly good and refreshing just like a pine-scented candle burning during winter.

Stan jolts out of his thoughts when Richie's hand touches his arm reassuringly. As promising as it feels, Stan does not sober up from his crisis and is reminded of Bill's touch on his face, how his fingers had dug into the meat of his cheeks. He can still feel them there.

'You don't have to talk, but....' Richie wants to know. If he were in his shoes, Stan would want to hear the same; gossip in this town is infectious, the population of Derry spreading rumours whenever possible (Stan being an easy target for the citizens as he's a small - but somewhat tall - soft Jewish boy with interests that differ from the average boy) and prejudice being the most dominant attitude present in households, there's no doubt this case would reach the already open ears. 'Remember what you said at your bar mitzvah? The thing about not noticing the monsters getting closer until it's too late?'

Stan gasps. 'You remember that?'

‘Course I did. Your aunt wouldn’t shut up about it. But it fits perfectly, don’t you think? The monsters, they’re your fears.’ Stan opens his mouth to deny it but Richie beats him to it. ‘Before you tell me ‘ *oh, but Richie, my love, it simply isn’t true!* ’ - his impression of Stan is *ridiculous* - ‘Hear me out. I know you. You always anticipate the worst - and you know it’s true; you worry. A lot. And I worry that you worry, but I know you’re strong and I believe in you because you’re nothing but weak. And it’s never too late. So whatever’s going through your head right now is not true. Unless you’re thinking about how hot Bill is because in that case, I have to disagree. Have you not seen me?’ He almost smiles at that.

‘Anyway, you’re letting yourself worry about something that’s probably stupid-’

‘I kissed Bill.’

‘Woah, woah. What the *fuck* ?’

‘We- he- he-’ he tries to take a deep breath but it only triggers more tears. ‘I kissed him. Well, he kissed me. For practice. For the play. We kissed and it didn’t mean anything real because he doesn’t like me and it hurts so much and- and I-’

‘*Fuck* .’

Stan continues to sniffle.

Richie’s right. *Fuck* .

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It’s opening night and Stan is hiding in the bathroom at school. The light above the middle sink flickers and Stan watches as it dives to its death. Once it does, he stares at the mirror in front of him where his face is being framed by the neon lights from the neighbouring sinks. They do nothing to hide what he doesn’t like: his curls seem more untamed than they’ve ever been his boring shade of brown (too dark to be blond and too light to be considered a brunet) is accentuated, the light hitting the odd angles of his nose and cheeks.

Stan has never given any thought to the standards of beauty people

seem to care too much about. All he's aware of is his nose is a bit big and his hair is too curly for his liking, his eyes are the same color as his hair and the few large freckles across his nose. Not to forget the single dimple that appears on his right cheek when he smiles. (He wouldn't complain if he had two or none, but having only one is frustrating.) You can't get any more plainer than that. It's not a bad thing, he enjoys blending in the background, but Beverly lights up every room she walks in, her hair bright as the sun and eyes reflecting like the sea. Her hair falls around her face in neat waves and the freckles on her face are sprinkled uniformly. She's gorgeous. He's everything but.

A loud buzzing noise coming from the intercom followed by a woman's voice announcing the play will start in ten minutes.

Looking down at the yarmulke he's been holding since he walked in, he contemplates his options one last time. The first one is to leave, and his fingers clench around the crocheted cap at the thought. Leaving would cause trouble; they'll notice his absence and question him- Bill will question him and it's the last thing he wants. But leaving would mean he won't have to watch Bill kiss someone else. His stomach cramps as he imagines the picture it would make. Would it be worth it?

Staying would mean nobody would find out about what's been going on inside his head for months: his feelings for Bill, discovering his sexuality. He wouldn't need to provide an alibi if he were to stay, he wouldn't need to make up an elaborate story as to why he couldn't attend the play at a school he's been attending for years and support his best friend. A cold wouldn't sell. People expect him to stay, but Bill's wish for him to attend is the only reason he considers staying.

He's doing this for Bill.

The Bill he's been avoiding since the incident.

Fishing two black barrettes from his pockets, he places the yarmulke on the back of his head, angles it up where his curls won't bend in a strange direction, and clips it into place. After making sure it doesn't move, he lets go of it, dropping his arms to his sides. It helps, a bit, having it on. It's subjective, but he feels better, protected, more in

control of himself. (He doesn't really, but he thinks if he believes hard enough, it'll come true, and that's enough for him.)

The bathroom door slams open and Ben runs in, gasping for air. He must have ran for his life trying to find Stan's hiding spot; the play starts in mere minutes and he looks panicked.

'Stanley Uris, the play's about to start!'

Ben doesn't give him anytime to reply before he's yanking him out of the bathroom by the wrist, barely giving him time to straighten up.

There it goes.

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The play itself isn't long; you'd think two thirty minutes long acts would require less rehearsals than they've been granted, but this is Derry, and Stan's been right all along: they're not worth the effort. Not to him, not to anyone in this town, but they still do it.

Now, with nine minutes remaining during which the kiss will happen, Stan's hands fly to his knees, squeezing them hard, the room spinning as the ticking of his watch becomes as loud as the performance. Every time a line of dialogue gets spoken, Stan checks it off like a list, each mark making him more and more anxious as he awaits the moment he's been dreading for the past few days. The darkness doesn't help; he sits in the unlit gymnasium between Richie and a nervous Ben, succumbing to his nightmares.

The ticking becomes louder as Bill - lovely, wonderful Bill - takes his place and awaits Beverly's arrival on stage for the last scene, and when she does, he hears Ben choke in his breath. Beverly stands before him with a smile on her face, hair curled into effortlessly-looking waves, lips stained with pink lipstick, looking more beautiful than the flowers in the town's park, and Stan's heart aches as Bill's eyes widen at her sight.

There's a few seconds left before it happens and Stan stops breathing, heart pounding with jealousy, nails digging into his skin hard enough to draw blood.



And it happens.

Bill's lips finally touch hers and it looks so perfect from where he sits it feels like he's been transported into a fairytale where he's the pauper who doesn't get to marry the prince or knight. And it hurts. It hurts more than the last hundred days combined because Bill looks happier than when they kissed.

A hand drops on top of his and he snaps his head to his left to see Richie absent-mindedly watching the play, his thumb softly stroking the back of his hand. He almost starts crying, just then, knowing Richie's there for him. He nearly stops worrying, but he can't. The pain is too powerful but Richie acts like quick relief medicine; the weight of Richie's hand upon his makes his caring unforgettable. Turning Richie's hand to intertwine their fingers, he squeezes his hand as a thank you. Richie squeezes back.

Looking back to the stage, the two are blushing just as Stan and he had a week earlier. He wishes this were a bad dream, something he could wash off in the morning, anything but real, but he knows the play's over and people around him are getting up to applaud the students. It's real, and Richie's getting up, hand slipping from his, and Stan can't stop staring at the lineup on stage - more specifically, Bill, who's bowing down with a huge smile plastered on his face.

This feels like his cue to leave. He's done his part, he's done enough for everyone, and all he wants is to go home, away from this. Away from Bill.

For a second, Bill's expression changes as he looks in his direction and drops when he finds him in the crowd, missing the second bow, their eyes locked into a dangerous position. Bill shouldn't be staring at him, Bill shouldn't be thinking about him, not when Beverly's by his side and the entire audience is praising him. Stan has nothing to give him apart from his heart and his tear-stained pillows that held him as he cried over him.

Not wanting to let Bill break his heart once more, he gets up, aware that a pair of blue eyes are following him as he does, and leaves the room.

Before he knows it, he's in the bathroom again, this time sobbing in the corner, not minding a bit he's sitting on the damp floor. He hates Bill Denbrough. He hates Bill and the curse he's put on him because it can't be anything but; love isn't supposed to hurt like this. He shouldn't be suffering like this in a dirty school bathroom at ten past nine and he hates whomever's letting this happen. He hates them, he hates this school, he hates his parents, he hates Bill, he hates-

'S-Stan?'

Too wrapped up with his hatred for the world, he doesn't hear the door open and Bill walks in, the distance between them shrinking with his every step.

Quickly, Stan gets up, hands vigorously drying his tears and smoothing down the front of his shirt.

Bill's within his reach in seconds, having crossed the length of the bathroom while Stan tried to make himself look presentable. He's wearing the white undershirt he must have had on for the play, the same one he often wore while they practiced. He looks nice. (Nice is an understatement from his part.)

Stan understands he needs to speak to him, he really does, but after having watched him kiss someone else, there's nothing he can say that wouldn't jeopardize their friendship. *Did you enjoy kissing me? More than her? Do you like her? Do you like me? I love you. I love you, I love you, I love you.*

He notices something small shining on Bill's cheek as he moves. He steps closer, intrigued, and notices flecks of glitter resting on his skin. With the silver tones of the glitter sitting below the blue of his eyes, both colors complimenting each other, he'd be lying if he'd say it didn't look pretty on him. Though, everything looks pretty on Bill. The glitter isn't supposed to be there, he knows it; his costume did not require stage makeup, and the more he stares at it, the more it starts looking like dust.

'There's glitter on your-' Stan's hand reaches up to dust the particles away, his fingers lingering on his skin, and this feels too much like the last time they were alone together, when they'd kissed, and he

wants to think this is happening for a reason, that them standing in this unsanitary bathroom is a sort of miracle, that they can finally finish what they started. It's nothing more than wishful thinking.

Up this close, he can see the ghost of Beverly's lips on his, bright pink residue on his mouth, the lipstick ruining the perfect canvas that is Bill's face. The shade of pink, which might just be the ugliest color his eyes has met, offends him like its sole purpose is to make Stan envy it, make him wish he could have been the one kissing him - him who has no chance of ever stealing Bill's heart.

Fury rises inside him and his hand glides to his jaw until his thumb is within reach of his mouth; he's so close to the pink he pushes his thumb upwards, bumping against Bill's lower lip, and wipes the color away until the red tint of his natural color pokes through. He rubs until there's no more (Bill is clean of *her* ) and leans back to admire the boy. He regrets ever thinking he could hate such a beautiful thing.

He lets his hand slide down his neck, and for a moment, he thinks he might be imagining the scene because Bill's lips fall open with the smallest of gasps. All of this seems like an impossible dream, but then he hears Bill whisper his name and it can't be a coincidence- not anymore.

A beat passes without a movement or word, then, without warning, Stan feels Bill's fingers wrap around his own. The gesture feels intimate, more so than the kisses they shared. It makes him melt inside to the point where he wants to confess everything he's been bottling up inside for the past months; the tormenting, the self-hate, the love, that maybe Bill won't shun him from his life if only he understood what Stan's been going through because of him.

The fingers grasp his hand a bit harder taking Stan back to reality where Bill's body is too close to his and his breath hits his face with a minty scent. With the glitter gone, Stan has to focus elsewhere on his face. The blue of Bill's eyes look more vibrant than they've ever been, the freckles hiding behind the redness of his cheeks, the neon lights reflecting the wetness of his lips.

There seems to be a magnet located in Bill's head because he keeps

moving forward until he nudges Stan's nose with his, letting his forehead drop against his own. Bill's neck nudges his fingers as he feels him swallowing, his ears catching the soft pant that follows it. He doesn't think he should be allowed to see these things, to feel Bill like this, that he doesn't deserve it all, but Bill's intoxicating and Stan feels addicted.

Just as he nearly gives up, Bill's hand flies up to cradle his face, fingers delicately stroking his skin, each touch urging him to give in. And he wants to, his lips almost brushing against his, teasing him, *testing* him.

Stan takes a last look at Bill's face before capturing his lips between his own and letting out a deep sigh as the familiar sensation frees him from thoughts. Kissing Bill this time doesn't feel the same; having barely spoken to him since the last time they kissed has rendered him overwhelmed with love. Never did he think it could be possible to feel this way about someone, about a friend, about a boy, but for the moment, he finds himself not caring.

Their lips part slowly, like they're afraid to leave the other, and Stan doesn't hesitate before kissing him again, putting his heart into it. Through the kiss, he tries to convey all the things he wishes he could tell him, every thought he's had before going to sleep. He wants him to know, he wants to have a chance, he wants this to be real so badly but it can't happen.

Before slipping into his hair, the fingers on his face press hard enough to remind him it's still there. And it hurts because Bill's kissing him back enthusiastically but the pressure feels different, almost like a goodbye, and it makes him crave more because he never wants to stop kissing Bill. Not when it feels like this.

But none of this means anything.

Not the hand holding his firmly, the fingers tugging on his curls before slipping away, or Bill's shaky breath as he breaks the kiss.

'I have to g-go...' It's barely a whisper.

'Don't go,' Stan begs against his lips with such neediness he barely

recognizes his own voice.

‘I have to.’

Heart sinking, he watches Bill, with a slower pace than usual, turn his back and walk out of the room.

And Stan doesn't stop him.

**Author's Note:**

Title is a Patrick Watson song. Labrinth's Jealous helped writing this.

If you have questions or anything my Tumblr is barrykoeghan

P.S. This is my first fic in like ten years and it probably sucks and I didn't edit it after finishing it so -- and I'm very French and Self-Conscious and weak thanks.